



Association of Pittsburgh Priests

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Association of Pittsburgh Priests calls on Catholic leaders to develop new pastoral, spiritual approach regarding abortion and the culture of life - June 13, 2022

BACKGROUND

For nearly 50 years the Roe v Wade decision of the Supreme Court has locked into place political positions relating to abortion. While our support of the innocent unborn must be clear and decisive, simplistic and polarizing party positions have drowned out attempts to truly understand the complexities and nuances of the issue. We cannot think of just the fetus or just the mother. We need to think of them together. To do so, we need new spiritual guidance on this matter.

Many Catholics, like other Americans, find terms like pro-life or pro-choice to be divisive, inadequate, and misleading. A Vox poll found that while 26% of Americans called themselves "pro-life" and 32% "pro-choice," another 42% said that they were neither, both, or refused to answer the question. Terms are powerful but they can be limiting and dangerous.

No matter what side (or middle) of this complex legal and moral debate one is on, it is the opinion of the APP that our Church, like much of our society, has failed to demonstrate a serious pastoral concern for abortion victims – including the fetuses who might never be born, the women who find themselves in dire situations with nowhere to turn, and the great mass of society that closes its eyes and ears to their cry for help.

According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, 18% of pregnancies, excluding miscarriages, ended in abortions, and the Institute expects that by the time these women reach 45, one in four will have had an abortion. Let's first recognize that these are likely to be the same women who also mother other children, sit in the pews next to us, or who used to sit in the pews next to us – until they no longer felt welcome. They may be our sisters, cousins, aunts, mothers, or grandmothers. They are real people in crisis. And regardless of what judicial rulings may say, they may continue to have abortions, but perhaps less safely.

While the Church teaches that abortion is gravely immoral, she also teaches that God's mercy and grace are limitless. It does not teach that the women facing this crisis should be abandoned, stigmatized, or criminalized, yet that is often what we have done in the past and what many want to do in the future.

We need to understand that for a woman who finds herself in need of an abortion, the abortion is not the only problem she faces. In some cases, she might face economic crisis, lack of healthcare, violent or abusive partners, immigration problems or job discrimination, or, especially in poverty pockets or in other countries, other hungry children. And others may have abortions for less serious social inconveniences that might be fixed with the proper supporting structure.

No matter the reason, we don't think the battle over abortion will be won or lost in the courts, the congress, or the state legislatures. We believe that the battle over abortion will be won when the woman facing an abortion can find the community of support that enables her to choose to have the child. We need a culture of life that reduces abortion and enables women to choose birth. We need a culture of life that lives in our faith communities.

STATEMENT OF THE APP

The Association of Pittsburgh Priests (APP) calls upon our Church leaders and people in the pews to develop a new and dynamic "**Pastoral Culture of Life**" in which the people of God learn to better minister to each other, appreciating the complexities we face in relation to the issue of life.

The APP has a long history of supporting the concept of the "seamless garment" or "consistent ethic of life." Within this context, like Pope Francis, the APP opposes the death penalty, abortion, militarism and unjust wars, hunger due to overconsumption and inequality, and destruction of our life-supporting natural environment. Aligned with Catholic Social Teaching, the APP believes that being "pro-life" incorporates all of these life-giving issues. It also believes a person, being born, has a right to live with dignity and that part of dignity is acknowledging the primacy of a well-formed conscience as a person stands before God. We believe there are better pastoral ways to help people form their consciences than have been employed in the past.

This **Pastoral Culture of Life** calls upon our Church leaders and people in the pews to develop a new and more dynamic outreach:

1. **Listening to women.** Creating safe spaces to hear the stories of women - not just related to abortion but also to the circumstances of why women find themselves in such positions. Safe spaces may include synodal discussions and special liturgies. But before vulnerable people will share their stories the people of God will have to earn their trust with preaching and counseling that respects conscience. Until we hear their stories we are dealing only in theory.
2. **Developing ministries to men** who too often and too casually place women in vulnerable situations, even when they think the sexual contact is consensual. This pastoral culture must also minister to men facing this decision with their partners or grieving the loss of their children through abortion.
3. **Re-visiting** how church teachings on contraceptives, and the less-than-compassionate preaching about contraceptives for men and women, sometimes place women in vulnerable positions regarding potential abortions. Only a small minority of Catholics consider birth control evil. Even among those that do, it is certainly viewed as a lesser evil than abortion. Pope John Paul II recognized this when he granted a dispensation to nuns in Africa to use birth control when subject to potential rape.
4. **Providing better personal and community support** for parents who choose to give birth or to adopt, especially for the adoption of vulnerable children.
5. **Advocating** also for a complete culture of life that passionately preaches:

- Against the death penalty, nuclear weapons, unjust wars, the collateral damages of so-called “just” wars, and wasteful overconsumption and destruction of our natural resources.
 - For the eradication of the physical and sexual abuse of children, spouses or sexual partners, prostitution, human trafficking, extreme poverty, drug abuse, and alcoholism.
 - For the passage of rational gun control legislation to protect all, especially children, from senseless death through gun violence.
 - For parish food banks and daycare for working single mothers.
 - For strong societal safety nets with healthcare for all (especially including pre-and post-natal care for mothers and infants), pregnancy and family leave programs, daycare for working single mothers, assistance for vulnerable populations in general, dignified, affordable and safe housing, and a living wage for adult workers.
 - For the realignment of polarizing parishes that perpetuate the economic and social isolation of poor and vulnerable populations.
6. **Revising** diocesan and parish job descriptions that discriminate against single mothers who give birth, and
 7. **Reconsidering** how the Church hierarchy has been used and manipulated to impede healthcare access among vulnerable populations.

Finally, we call upon our faith leaders to remove any bans on receiving the spiritual nourishment of the Eucharist from persons who had had an abortion or who have aided in an abortion without extensive attempts to understand the circumstances that may have led to it. We call on them to distinguish between the role of bishop and moral leader and that of elected official or even voter. As Pope Francis teaches in the Joy of Love, “moral laws are ideals to be preached, not stones to throw or closed hearts to hide behind...[and] elected officials must make compromise decisions and are frequently forced to choose between greater and lesser evils... [and] mitigating factors surrounding objective situations may not mean moral culpability... [and we should] seek always the primacy of charity as a response to the completely gratuitous offer of God’s love.” [CF Joy of Love]

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